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On resilience, or acceleration as political value

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Zebrowski makes an important contribution to knowledge and understanding of the history of Resilience thinking. His excellent book adds substantially to an existing body of scholarship which views Resilience as a “correlate of an emerging order of Liberal government”, but it is much more methodologically rigorous than other works that have developed this argument, and develops new empirical specifics in the UK context and far greater nuance as a consequence. Genealogy is deployed, in the sense that Foucault and Nietzsche suggested it should be, to emphasise how Resilience appears as a value only through its capture and mobilisation by contingent social forces. Resilience, Zebrowski argues very convincingly, is not natural. Resilience thinking cannot, therefore, be understood as the product of scientific progress in our understanding of the nature of nature after the complexity turn. Rather, the value assigned to Resilience and to Resilience thinking is the product of a history of struggle, of lost events and strange inconsistencies. As a good genealogist, Zebrowski refuses to paint over the contingency involved in any process of value formation.

For this reason, Zebrowski’s repeatedly refuses to *reduce* resilience to being a creature of Neoliberalism, but rather seeks to examine how multiple understandings of resilience are bound into a becoming-Neoliberal which is neither predetermined nor necessary in the UK context. This leaves open the possibility of becomings-otherwise to which Resilience may be, or perhaps must be, subjected. This clearly means that engaging in the study of the ‘Value of Resilience’ has multiple implications for Zebrowski, referencing its problematizing ‘value’ for security discourse, its peculiar ‘valuation’ as a biopolitical register, and the possibility of alternate political ‘valuations’ gestured towards in the conclusion. It is this latter possibility that we ought to be most interested in.

Zebrowski examines the origins of Resilience thinking in anti-strike policy machineries in the UK, which he deems designed to ensure the perpetuation of vital flows in society. His argument is that population-life is newly problematized as manageable and technically amenable to government under the UK Civil Contingencies apparatus. The promise of nuclear destruction offers a further strand to the becoming of Resilience in the UK context, as does the decline of understandings of social insurance, changing assumptions about mass behaviour around panic, and the transnational logics of the Revolution in Military Affairs. Zebrowski very effectively demonstrates, through a number of fields, how a sense of the inadequacies of the protective ‘security’ model accompanied the rise of Neoliberal understanding of the state, and contends that biopolitical logics are quite self-evidently at work in Resilience thinking. The concept of a ‘resilient population’ enunciates a way of thinking and being that is peculiar to the governmentality that underpins Neoliberal regimes. Resilience and Neoliberalism are *correlates* but they are also functionally linked together through the biopolitical diagram.

Of course, there are significant differences between suggesting Resilience is functionally linked to biopolitics and calling it a “correlate” of neoliberalism, which inserts a potential note of ambiguity

into the book. I am inclined to be sympathetic to Massumi's suggestion, noted in the book's introduction, that something more than biopolitics may be at stake in techniques of resilience. Indeed, Zebrowski rejects a teleological reading of Resilience into history, finding that the values present in the distinct orders of governance in UK Civil Contingencies are historically layered together like the geological accumulation of strata. Does this stratification show that Resilience thinking is increasingly a function of biopolitics, in the manner that constitutes something like the Foucaultian consensus? Or is Resilience doing independent work which, as Zebrowski puts it, presents 'new imperatives' to biopower?

Zebrowski's understanding of the relationship between resilience thinking and neoliberalism certainly seems to go beyond the standard Foucaultian model which sees Resilience thinking as the outlet of biopolitical thinking. This is the sense of his claim that resilience has "no unambiguous meaning or self-evident value", and that "the value of resilience can be attributed to the process through which neoliberalism was distinguished as rationality of government from previous articulations of liberalism". Biopower is clearly at not all that is at stake in this shift. Paul Virilio seems an implicit reference when Zebrowski suggests that Resilience thinking is associated with technologies of "speed". That he remains implicit is a shame. In charting the dialogue between 'military' and 'civil' thinking, much of Zebrowski's analysis actually seems rather more resonant of Virilio than Foucault. Whilst the biopolitical is repeatedly noted as the key term of art in the book, much of the empirical datum which Zebrowski so eloquently charts might imply just as plausibly the surrender of Liberalism to a military logistics, which must be at least partially distinct from the concept of the biopolitical. For Virilio, the rise of military logistics, and their colonisation of modern society, does not imply a new kind of political condition ripe, in Foucaultian style, for the emergence of a new populational counter-conduct, resilient or otherwise, rather it implies the death of the political itself (understood as a space for securing a collective duration). Surely when disaster preparation and recovery have become indistinguishable from one another, as Zebrowski suggests they have today, we have left (bio)politics behind altogether for the logics of Pure War. When Zebrowski refers to resilience as defined by adaptive speed, perhaps we are not seeing the capture of Resilience by biopolitical governmentality, but Liberalism's capture by a trajectory dedicated to permanent self-destruction in the name of a creativity. This necrophiliac social order is more than biopolitical.

Zebrowski references Heidegger's critique of technology as an important step in his analysis. Heidegger's fear that technological "enframing" would inhibit authentic being (towards-death) finds modified re-articulation in Virilio's call for a return to 'political time' in the face of the militaristic terror of technological speed. Zebrowski is prudent to follow Foucault in noting that "human existence has always been expressed through its engagement with technology", but the political problem of technological being remains hanging over the central question posed by the book: What happens to life 'which is not adaptive, which refuses to adapt'? If 'Resilience secures freedom by freeing security', isn't this a military technological, and so entirely post-political, valuation of freedom towards death. In question here is not, simply, the killing of life that does not fit the biopolitical mould, but the glorification of perpetual self-overcoming in the name of technical progress.

The problem of the Value of Resilience is the problem of the sustainability of (bio)political value *as such* amidst technological speed. Zebrowski's clearly wishes to put the Neoliberal valuation of

Resilience into question, by revealing the becoming of Resilience “alongside” the becoming of Neoliberal ways of thinking and being in the world. Rather than demonstrating that Resilience has become the function of a defined Neoliberalism (“Neoliberalism is an ongoing project”), what he shows genealogically is their common intersection with logistics, with the technologies of war, without fully writing a genealogy of its (bio)political values. I am highly sympathetic with the gesture towards contestation around the possibilities of Resilience, and the productive differencing qualities of mimicry, but I was left with a sense that Zebrowski leaves slightly under-developed the question of how Resilience might be linked to (bio)political values that are not militarily over-coded.

It is not an invention of Neoliberalism to suggest that a life which cannot change or die is not really alive - it is immortal, divine, unearthly and uncanny - and is certainly not political. All forms of political life must find their value in conversation with uncertainty and death. However, in arguing at the close of the book that the “highest forms of Resilience” are about “self-overcoming”, and that this may provide a possible way-out for Resilience thinking from a Neoliberal straightjacket, important dangers are glossed over. The problem with Resilience is not necessarily that it may form a technology for exclusionary or murderous biopolitical government and control, valorising some lives over others, but that it slips into the celebration of generic insecurity when valued in and of itself, which tips into generically suicidal accelerations. The answer, Virilio would say, is to bring the problem of political duration back in. Political communities have to find ways to endure. The hope for a *political value* of resilience raises questions about the construction of communities of being, of collective meanings that are able to subsist through a shared experience of duration. Perhaps resilience cannot or should not be seen as a value in itself, but all political values require mechanisms to persist through time. The questionable resilience of all (bio)political values amidst technological acceleration thus seems to be the problem posed, but perhaps not fully answered, by the Value of Resilience.